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ABSTRACT

Advocates, policymakers, and researchers have predicted that changes in the welfare system brought about by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 would increase the number of children who are abused and neglected, referred to child protective services, and placed in foster care. This study examined how welfare reform has affected child welfare caseloads, summarizing trends in caseload data before and after welfare reform. It focused on testimonial data from various state and local respondents about the effects of welfare reform they have observed on families' involvement with the child welfare system, and it documented research efforts underway to study the effects of welfare reform on child welfare. Overall, there was no evidence to suggest that federal welfare reform to date has had a significant effect on child welfare caseloads. Caseload data and testimony of over 350 state and local respondents supported this conclusion. The study identified potential areas of concern for policymakers related to: specific populations that may be vulnerable; unmet training needs of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and child welfare agency staff; the potential effects of additional sanctions and time limits; and the scope of the research underway and planned to assess the effects of welfare reform. An appendix presents findings from other welfare reform studies. (Contains 60 references.) (SM)

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Welfare Reform's Effect on Child Welfare Caseloads

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01-04

Discussion Papers

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Assessing the New Federalism
An Urban Institute Program to Assess Changing Social Policies

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01-04

February
2001

Assessing the New Federalism

An Urban Institute Program to Assess Changing Social Policies

Assessing the New Federalism

Assessing the New Federalism is a multi-year Urban Institute project designed to analyze the devolution of responsibility for social programs from the federal government to the states. It focuses primarily on health care, income security, employment and training programs, and social services. Researchers monitor program changes and fiscal developments. Alan Weil is the project director. In collaboration with Child Trends, the project studies changes in family well-being. The project provides timely, nonpartisan information to inform public debate and to help state and local decisionmakers carry out their new responsibilities more effectively.

Key components of the project include a household survey, studies of policies in 13 states, and a database with information on all states and the District of Columbia. Publications and database are available free of charge on the Urban Institute's Web site: http://www.urban.org.

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Contents

Executive Summary 1

Welfare Reform's Effect on Child Welfare Caseloads 5
- Potential Effects of Welfare Reform on Child Welfare 6
- Assessing the Effects of Welfare Reform on Child Welfare Caseloads 13
- Methodology 15

Effects of Welfare Reform on Families Coming into the System 17
- Pre- and Post-Welfare Reform Child Welfare Caseload Data 17
- Respondents' Assessment of Welfare Reform Effects 22
- Why Are We Not Seeing Greater Effects? 28

Effects of Welfare Reform on Dual-System Families 31
- Pre- and Post Welfare Reform Trends 31
- Respondents' Assessment of Welfare Reform's Effects 34
- Why Are We Not Seeing Greater Effects 38

Conclusion 41

Appendix A: Findings from Other Welfare Reform Studies 45

References 53

About the Authors 59

Executive Summary

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), signed by President Clinton in August 1996, significantly altered this nation's safety net for low-income children and families. From the preliminary discussions about welfare reform through the debates on and passage of PRWORA, policymakers, advocates, and researchers expressed fears about what would happen to those families that did not fare well under the new welfare system. Many predicted that welfare changes would increase the number of children who are abused and neglected, referred to child protective services, and placed in foster care or other out-of-home settings. While data are limited, we do know that there is a strong link between welfare receipt and risk of child welfare involvement, and recent studies have also documented the link between welfare receipt and future child welfare involvement.

Almost universally, the respondents in our study expected to see significant negative effects of welfare reform on the child welfare caseload. These expectations were based on the assumption that welfare reform would increase the number of children in poverty and would create additional stress on welfare families. Because poverty is highly correlated with child maltreatment and involvement in the child welfare system, welfare effects on family income may affect the number of families reported to child welfare authorities. Many researchers have argued that changes in income notwithstanding, the stress and/or benefits that welfare recipients experience from meeting the new requirements may affect child maltreatment reporting. Families involved in both the welfare and child welfare systems, "dual-system" families, may feel most stressed by the demands placed on them.

To document how welfare reform and related changes may be affecting child welfare caseloads, in 1999 the Urban Institute conducted in-depth case studies in 12 states and multiple local sites. These case studies, a follow-up to case studies conducted in these same localities in 1997, included in-person, semistructured interviews with a broad range of welfare and child welfare stakeholders including administrators, researchers, supervisors, legislative representatives, and advocates. We also conducted focus groups with child welfare workers at each local site. Interview protocols for both the semistructured and focus group interviews focused on changes in the interaction and collaboration between the child welfare agency and the welfare office; recent changes in staffing and staff responsibilities; the resources available for the child welfare agency and how these have changed since welfare reform; recent changes in service delivery policies and practices; and changes in the number and types of families coming to the attention of child welfare. We specifically asked respondents to assess the effects, if any, that welfare reform had had on child welfare caseloads. The case studies were supplemented by telephone interviews with a stratified random sample of 125 county child welfare officials in our 12 case study states and Mississippi, a state that decided not to participate in the case studies.

Despite widespread fears, we found no evidence to suggest that welfare reform has significantly increased the number of families referred to child welfare agencies. Caseload data show that allegations and substantiated reports of abuse and neglect have been stable or declining since welfare reform was implemented, continuing the trend in caseloads prior to welfare reform. While case study respondents agreed that welfare reform has not significantly affected child welfare caseloads, they did identify a variety

of smaller effects they have seen on families and offered explanations as to why greater effects have not yet been observed but may be seen in the near future.

If welfare reform has affected child welfare caseloads thus far, it appears that it has had a greater effect on dual-system families than on new families coming to the attention of child welfare authorities. This conclusion is based on the views of respondents who documented the struggles that some child welfare families have experienced in attempting to meet the demands placed on them by both child welfare and welfare agencies.

Respondents offered numerous explanations for why they were not seeing the significant negative effects of welfare reform on child abuse and neglect reporting that they had originally anticipated. The most common response to our questions about the effects of welfare reform on the child welfare system was "It's too early to tell," as respondents argued that welfare families have not felt the brunt of the reforms because none of them have yet been affected by lifetime limits on assistance. Many respondents suggested that families that have lost benefits following welfare reform changes have thus far found other supports that allow them to cope with the financial loss. Others suggested that we are not seeing significant effects because we are not looking. Despite numerous studies assessing the effects of welfare reform, we have very limited hard data on the extent to which welfare families are being reported to child welfare agencies for abuse or neglect. The large majority of respondents (administrators as well as front-line workers) believe that welfare reform is still likely to have a significant negative impact on child welfare caseloads.

Welfare Reform's Effect on Child Welfare Caseloads

In 1999, the Urban Institute conducted intensive case studies in 12 states to assess changes in state and local child welfare agencies following implementation of welfare reform. In designing these case studies we were acutely aware that attempting to draw any conclusions about the effects of welfare reform, and in particular effects on child welfare caseloads, would be problematic. However, we also knew that the potential effects of welfare reform on child welfare caseloads were a major concern for many policymakers. Thus, we designed our study to identify data that would help inform the debate about possible effects even if we could not definitively demonstrate effects or lack thereof.

This paper documents the information we collected about how welfare reform has affected child welfare caseloads. It summarizes trends in caseload data before and after welfare reform and attempts to explain observed changes. The paper summarizes testimonial data from a wide range of state and local respondents about the effects of welfare reform they have observed on families' involvement with the child welfare system. Finally, the paper documents research efforts under way to study the effects of welfare reform on child welfare and to address the question, "If there is an impact, how will we know?"

Potential Effects of Welfare Reform on Child Welfare

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), signed by President Clinton in August 1996, significantly altered this nation's safety net for low-income children and families. In replacing Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), PRWORA removed the entitlement for families with incomes below a certain level to receive financial assistance from the federal government. The Act limits the amount of time low-income families may receive federal assistance[1] and imposes numerous requirements that recipients must meet in order to receive welfare benefits. For example, under TANF, recipients must meet stricter work requirements,[2] ensure that minor children are enrolled in school,[3] and cooperate with child support enforcement agencies.[4] In addition, PRWORA prohibits certain individuals from receiving federal assistance. Unless a state opts out or opts to narrow the restriction, persons convicted of any drug-related felony face a lifetime ban on federal aid. Persons convicted of welfare fraud may not receive aid for 10 years. PRWORA also restricts noncitizen eligibility for

[1] Under PRWORA, states may not use TANF funds to provide assistance to a family that includes an adult who has received assistance for more than 60 months.

[2] Recipients must participate in work activities within two years of receiving aid. In addition, TANF requires that a minimum percentage of the welfare caseload in each state be working.

[3] States are prohibited from using TANF funds to provide assistance to an individual who is under age 18, is unmarried, has a minor child at least 12 weeks old, and has not successfully completed high school or its equivalent, unless the individual either participates in education activities directed toward attainment of a high school diploma or its equivalent or participates in an alternative education or training program approved by the state.

[4] If the state child support enforcement agency determines that an individual is not cooperating in establishing, modifying, or enforcing a support order with respect to a child of the individual, and the individual does not qualify for any good cause or other exception established by the state, the state is required to either reduce the assistance that would otherwise be provided to the family by at least 25 percent or deny the family any assistance under the state TANF program.

a wide range of public programs including TANF, Food Stamps, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Medicaid.[5]

Although federal welfare reform established a variety of minimum requirements in some areas, states have considerable flexibility to diverge from these minimum requirements, and a number of provisions are open to state discretion. For example, states have considerable discretion in establishing exemptions from time limits[6] and work requirements, extensions to time limits, and procedures for sanctioning noncomplying recipients. Moreover, while PRWORA was signed into law in August 1996, states' implementation of these reforms varies widely and in some cases predates the federal law. For example, the date at which welfare assistance time limits begin varies from October 1993[7] to July 1998 (Gallagher et al. 1998).

Concerns about Unintended Consequences of Welfare Reform

From the preliminary discussions about welfare reform through the debates on and passage of PRWORA, policymakers, advocates, and researchers expressed fears about what would happen to those families that did not fare well under the new welfare system. Many predicted that welfare changes would increase the number of children who are abused and neglected, referred to child protective services, and placed in foster care

[5]More specifically, PRWORA bars most legal immigrants from receiving food stamps and SSI and gives states the option of providing TANF and Medicaid to immigrants who entered before the law was passed on August 22, 1996. The law bars legal immigrants entering after that date from TANF and Medicaid for their first five years in the country. Key exceptions to these restrictions include refugees and those who have worked for at least 10 years. Since the law was passed, the federal government has restored SSI and food stamp eligibility to some legal immigrants. In addition, nearly every state has kept preenactment immigrants eligible for TANF and Medicaid, and some states have created state-funded programs for immigrants who remain ineligible for federal assistance.

[6]Under PRWORA, states may exempt up to 20 percent of their caseloads from the 60-month time limit.

[7]Twelve states implemented time limits prior to passage of PRWORA.

or other out-of-home settings (Aber, Brooks-Gunn, and Maynard 1995; Allen 1996; Child Welfare League of America 1998; Knitzer and Bernard 1997). In addition, some expressed concern about how welfare recipients already involved with the child welfare system would do (Frame et al. 1998).

While data are limited, we do know that there is a strong link between welfare receipt and risk of child welfare involvement (Barth and Haapala 1993; Gil 1970; Jones and McCurdy 1992; Russell and Trainor 1984). According to Pelton (1994), close to half of all identified incidents of child abuse or neglect occur in families receiving welfare. More than half of all foster children come from homes that are eligible for welfare (U.S. Congress 1998). In focus groups conducted by the Urban Institute in 1999, child welfare workers estimated that between 70 and 90 percent of families receiving in-home support services through the child welfare system were on welfare.

Recent studies have also documented the link between welfare receipt and future child welfare involvement (Needell et al.1999; Shook 1999; DHHS 2000b). For example, in 1990 one in four new child entrants to AFDC in California had some contact with child welfare agencies within five years (Needell et al. 1999). Another study found that in Illinois, California, and North Carolina, between 2 and 3 percent of children entering AFDC are placed in foster care within two years (DHHS, 2000b). It is interesting to note that the vast majority (between 85 and 96 percent) of these children were placed in foster care prior to their AFDC case closing (ASPE, 2000). Thus, it is unlikely that we will see significant transitions from welfare to foster care if we assess the outcomes of only those recipients who leave welfare, though we still may see increased reporting of abuse and neglect.

While a transition rate from welfare to foster care of 3 percent may seem relatively small, the sheer size of the TANF caseload (5,318,722 children in FY 1999) compared with the foster care caseload (547,000 children in March 1999) makes this percentage, and changes to it, quite significant. Even a slight increase in the rate of child welfare involvement of TANF families could lead to a significant increase in the number of children involved with child welfare. For example, a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) report estimated that if an additional 1 percent of children who begin receiving TANF after welfare reform entered foster care, foster care entries would increase by 25 percent (DHHS, 2000b).

Why There May Be an Impact

Almost unanimously, respondents in our study expected to see significant negative effects of welfare reform on the child welfare caseload. Child welfare officials, welfare officials, child welfare caseworkers, researchers, and advocates said that they initially expected that certain families would not do well under the new welfare system and that some of these families would require protective supervision. These expectations were based on the assumption that welfare reform would increase the number of children in poverty and would create additional stress on welfare families.

Because poverty is highly correlated with child maltreatment and involvement in the child welfare system, welfare effects on family income may affect the number of families reported to child welfare authorities. Research has shown that not only are low-income children at greater risk of child maltreatment (Coulton et al. 1995; Gelles 1992; Gil 1971; Giovannoni and Billingsley 1970), but poor families are also more likely to be

reported to child welfare and more likely to have a substantiated report of maltreatment (Pelton 1994; Lee and Goerge 1999; Zuravin 1989; Gelles 1992; Gillham et al.1998). Above we noted that receipt of welfare is correlated with child welfare involvement, but research also shows that loss or reduction of welfare benefits may lead to greater reporting of abuse and neglect (Needell et al. 1999; Paxson and Waldfogel 1999; Shook 1999). Families diverted from the welfare system through one-time payments or that decide not to apply for benefits given the new requirements may also be at risk. If welfare reform does negatively affect families' income, reports of child neglect (as opposed to abuse) may be most affected. Research has shown that neglect is most closely associated with poverty (Drake and Pandey 1996; Jones and McCurdy 1992; Sedlack and Broadhurst 1996) and that neglectful families are the poorest of the poor (Giovannoni and Billingsley 1979; Nelson, Saunders, and Landsman 1993; Wolock and Horowitz 1979). If welfare reform increases families' income, we may expect to see reports of child neglect decrease.

Although poverty is correlated with child maltreatment, it is important to point out that most poor families do not maltreat their children[8] and that poverty does not equate with neglect. During our case study interviews, child welfare administrators were clear that poverty in and of itself does not constitute neglect. Some states' statutes specifically say that financial deprivation alone is not sufficient for the state to take custody of a child. Although workers agreed that poverty does not constitute neglect, they did note that there can be a fine line between the two. Workers noted that poor

[8] In 1998, there were 13.5 million children in poverty while the total number of children investigated for maltreatment was less than 3 million (U.S. Census Bureau 1999; DHHS 2000).

families that are attempting to care for their children the best they can are not neglectful. However, when poor families fail to care for their children out of indifference or incapacity, then an allegation of neglect is appropriate. Moreover, while poverty may not constitute neglect and may not be sufficient grounds for a child's removal, it appears that poverty-related factors (such as unsafe housing or inadequate food) may put children at risk and be sufficient for child welfare to investigate and provide protective supervision. In addition, even if child welfare officials are clear that poverty does not constitute neglect, that does not mean that people who report families for alleged neglect understand or share this view.

In addition to the link between poverty and neglect, poverty may also be associated with increased child abuse. Research suggests that the strong relationship between poverty, poor parenting, and child maltreatment arises from the stresses and hardships that poverty presents (Conger et al. 1994; Garbarino 1976; McLoyd 1990). Research suggests that mothers who receive welfare are not only particularly vulnerable to the stresses associated with poverty, but may also be less psychologically equipped to deal with the stress, resulting in greater risk of child maltreatment (Garfinkel and McLanahan 1986; McLoyd 1990).

Welfare reform may lead to greater reporting of child maltreatment simply because welfare agencies are supposed to have greater involvement with recipients in assessing potential barriers to self-sufficiency. It has been argued that the association between poverty and maltreatment is partially due to greater surveillance in poor communities, and some research supports this (Fryer 1990).

Many researchers have argued that changes in income notwithstanding, the stress and/or benefits that welfare recipients experience from meeting the new requirements may affect child maltreatment reporting (Holden and Banez 1996; Knitzer and Bernard 1997; Meezan and Giovannoni 1995; Weintraub & Wolf 1983). Welfare reform requires recipients to balance work and family responsibilities. Many long-term welfare recipients have little if any work experience (Zedlewski 1999), and thus securing and keeping a job while caring for their children may be very stressful for them. One particular concern that has been raised is the potential for increased numbers of children to be left unsupervised if parents go to work and are unable to find stable child care (Courtney 1997; Knitzer and Bernard 1997). At the same time, welfare recipients who are able to secure employment may benefit from increased motivation and self-confidence. In addition, recipients may benefit if mental health, substance abuse, or domestic violence problems are identified and services to address these problems are provided.

Families involved in both the welfare and child welfare systems, "dual-system" families, may feel most stressed by the demands placed on them. To receive TANF, most recipients are required to develop and make progress on a self-sufficiency plan. Unless exempt, they are required to find and maintain employment or to complete activities necessary to make them more employable. Parents involved with child welfare agencies have case plans outlining the activities they must complete in order to keep their children or to reunify with their children. In addition, parents are required to periodically meet with child welfare caseworkers and must attend certain court hearings. Unless self-sufficiency and child welfare case plans are coordinated, dual-system families may face

competing or even conflicting demands. Moreover, employment may leave welfare parents who have a child in foster care with less time to complete child welfare case plans and thereby delay reunification.

Assessing the Effects of Welfare Reform on Child Welfare Caseloads

It is extremely difficult to assess changes occurring from any social policy and almost impossible to show cause and effect in a statistical sense.[9] Most studies of social policy changes address descriptive or normative questions, and those that seek to assess impacts typically rely on quasi-experimental research designs that often have significant limitations. Measuring the impact of welfare reform on child welfare caseloads is further complicated by the lack of reliable and complete child welfare caseload data and by the changing nature of both welfare and child welfare policies and practices.

Monitoring the actual incidence of abuse and neglect is very hard and costly to measure, especially at the state level.[10] Interviewing potential victims of abuse and neglect is not generally possible given the fact that many are young children, and perpetrators of child maltreatment are unlikely to self-report their behavior. Thus most studies rely on data collected by child welfare agencies in response to reports of abuse or neglect. Unfortunately, child welfare data collection has historically been limited in

[9] Cause and effect is best measured by a field study that uses a random assignment design. Such experiments are rare in the social sciences, and randomized trials are being used in few if any of the current welfare evaluations.

[10] Determining the incidence of abuse or neglect is problematic because there are no explicit or uniform definitions of what constitutes abuse or neglect. Yet, even if definitions were explicit, measuring the incidence of abuse and neglect is difficult in that researchers must rely on self-reports, officially reported allegations, or incidents observed by a knowledgeable professional. HHS has funded three National Incidence Studies (NIS) that have used surveys of community and public agency professionals to provide information on the incidence of abuse and neglect they observed.

scope and in quality; although it has improved markedly in the past few years.[11] In addition, timeliness is an issue for evaluation, because there is currently a two-year lag in publishing states' child welfare data; in 2000 the federal government published the 1998 data that states provided. Interpreting changes in child welfare caseloads is also problematic. Even states that are now collecting and analyzing detailed child welfare data may lack similar historical data for comparison. Moreover, states' child welfare information systems have evolved greatly over the past few years, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between real caseload changes and changes resulting from information system changes.

Similarly, welfare reform is not the only, and most likely not the most influential, change affecting state child welfare systems. At the same time, states' TANF policies and practices are still evolving.

Among the numerous studies under way on the outcomes and effects of welfare reform on children, few are designed to examine effects on child welfare caseloads. Thus, to a large extent we must look at more general studies of welfare reform and examine what lessons, if any, can be drawn about effects on child welfare. Most of the current research on welfare reform's effects focuses on outcomes for adults leaving welfare, i.e. "leaver studies." There is logic to focusing on those direct effects, since welfare reform was intended, first and foremost, to raise the employment and earnings of

[11] In 1993, as part of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act, Congress required that states establish foster care and adoption data collection systems. As of October 4, 2000, 25 states had fully operational State Automatic Child Welfare Information Systems (SACWIS) that meet U.S. Department of Health and Human Services standards (7 had partially operational systems, 9 were in the process of being implemented, and 8 were in planning). However, many states have experienced difficulties with SACWIS implementation. Although 43 states and the District of Columbia submitted some usable foster care data

adults in welfare families, discourage some families from even applying for cash assistance, and lower the proportion of state populations on welfare and the amount of assistance they need. Among leaver studies that include an examination of child welfare outcomes, nearly all fail to include dual-system families, rendering impossible any later attempts to focus on the effects of welfare reform on children already involved with child welfare agencies. Second, some leaver studies, by definition, ignore important groups of families that could become just as significant a source of referral for abuse or neglect as leavers: those diverted from TANF, those discouraged from applying, and those sanctioned but still on welfare. It is interesting to note that the studies that have examined child welfare outcomes have found relatively low incidence of child welfare involvement among the leaver population (see appendix A for a summary of welfare reform studies completed or under way that are assessing child welfare outcomes).

Methodology

To document how welfare reform and related changes may be affecting child welfare caseloads, we conducted in-depth case studies in 12 states and multiple local sites.[12] These case studies, a follow-up to case studies conducted in these same localities in 1997, included in-person, semistructured interviews with a broad range of welfare and child welfare stakeholders including administrators, researchers, supervisors, legislative representatives, and advocates. We also conducted focus groups with child welfare

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to HHS for the period April 1, 1999 to September 30, 1999, many states are still unable to accurately report certain data elements.

[12] Alabama (Birmingham), California (Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Diego counties) Colorado (Denver), Florida (Miami, Tampa), Massachusetts (Boston), Michigan (Detroit), Minnesota (Minneapolis), New Jersey (Jersey City), New York (Buffalo, New York City), Texas (El Paso, Houston), Washington (Seattle), and Wisconsin (Milwaukee, Racine).

workers at each local site. Interview protocols for both the semistructured and focus group interviews focused on changes in the interaction and collaboration between the child welfare agency and the welfare office; recent changes in staffing and staff responsibilities; the resources available for the child welfare agency and how these have changed since welfare reform; recent changes in service delivery policies and practices; and changes in the number and types of families coming to the attention of child welfare.[13] We specifically asked respondents to assess the effects, if any, that welfare reform had had on child welfare caseloads. The case studies were supplemented by telephone interviews with a stratified random sample of 125 county child welfare officials in our 12 case study states and Mississippi, a state that decided not to participate in the case studies.[14] These telephone conversations touched on the same issues as the in-person interviews.[15] In addition, to document actual caseload changes following welfare reform we analyzed several years of state child welfare caseload data and asked agency researchers to offer explanations for observed changes.

[13] Subsequent reports will document changes in states' financing of child welfare services, collaboration between welfare and child welfare agencies resulting from welfare reform, and other major changes affecting child welfare agencies.

[14] We attempted to complete 15 interviews in the 6 states we anticipated to vary significantly at the local level and 5 interviews in the 7 states we anticipated to vary less. Overall we completed 110 telephone interviews and had an 85 percent response rate. For each state, we had at least an 80 percent response rate.

[15] Qualitative information provided through the case studies, county telephone interviews, and a variety of secondary documentation was coded and analyzed using Nud*ist content analysis software.

Effects of Welfare Reform on Families Coming into the System

Despite widespread fears, we found no evidence to suggest that welfare reform has significantly increased the number of families referred to child welfare agencies. Caseload data show that allegations and substantiated reports of abuse and neglect have been stable or declining since welfare reform was implemented, continuing the trend in caseloads prior to welfare reform. Given the many other changes child welfare agencies are currently undertaking, effects of welfare reform may be hidden by summary caseload data. While case study respondents agreed that welfare reform has not significantly affected the number of families reported to child welfare, they did identify a variety of smaller effects they have seen and offered explanations as to why greater effects have not yet been observed but may be seen in the near future.

Pre- and Post-Welfare Reform Child Welfare Caseload Data

Available child welfare caseload data (for which 1998 is the most recent year) show that there has been no significant change in the number of families coming to the attention of child welfare agencies following welfare reform. Beginning before welfare reform, in about 1994, and continuing after welfare reform through 1998, nationally the number of children alleged and substantiated as victims of abuse and neglect has decreased or remained stable. In some cases national data may mask trends in individual locations. For this reason, we also examined data from the 12 case study states. These data were largely consistent with national trends, although some states did experience increases in the number of children investigated for alleged abuse or neglect. However, in

each of these instances, state respondents attributed these increases not to welfare reform but to state-specific changes in determining which allegations to investigate fully.

Although the available data do not provide evidence that welfare reform has adversely affected child welfare caseloads, data specifically on the number of welfare families entering the child welfare system are not available. Moreover, child welfare caseload data are currently not available after 1998, when key welfare reform requirements began to take effect in many states.

Pre-Welfare Trends

The modern U.S. child welfare system dates back to only the 1960s. Between 1963 and 1967, every state and the District of Columbia enacted child abuse and neglect reporting laws. As public awareness of child maltreatment intensified, the number of reports of child maltreatment investigated grew exponentially. Between 1976 and 1993, the number of investigated child abuse and neglect reports rose by approximately 340 percent, an increase from 10 to 43 per 1,000 children (U.S. Congress 1998). Researchers have provided a variety of explanations for this increase including increased substance abuse (especially crack cocaine), poverty, and homelessness and an increase in the number of single-parent families.

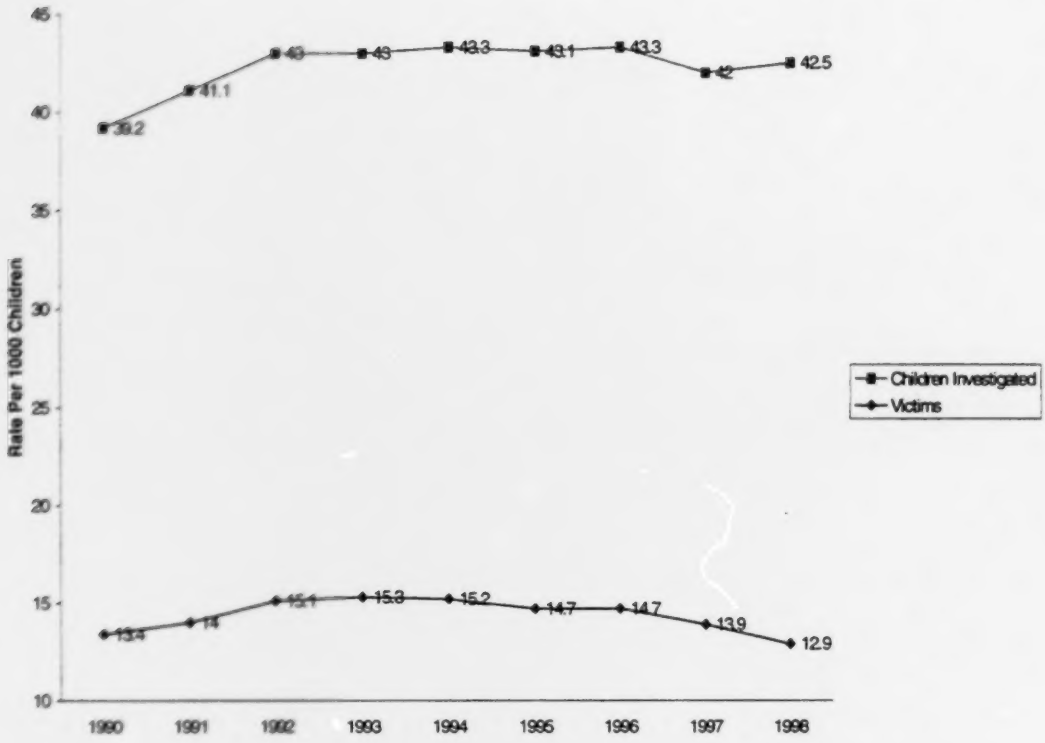

Figure 1: Pre- and Post-Welfare Reform Trends in Investigations and Substantiations (Source: DHHS 2000)

Between 1993 and 1996, national data show that the number of children investigated for alleged abuse or neglect increased slightly from 2,876,000 (43 per 1000) in 1993 to 2,988,000 (43.3 per 1000) in 1996, an average annual increase of 1.3 percent (see figure 1). In the 11 case study states that provided data, the number of children investigated for abuse and neglect between 1993 and 1996 declined in 6 states, with the other 5 states reporting slight increases (all below 5 percent annual increases (see table 1)). [16]

[16] Using 1996 as the transition year from pre- to post-welfare reform is problematic because, as we noted earlier, states implemented welfare reform at different points in time, with some states implementing reforms prior to 1996 and others well after.

National data show that the number of children found to be victims of maltreatment decreased from 1993 to 1996, from 1,026,000 in 1993 (15.3 per 1,000) to 1,012,000 in 1996 (14.7 per 1,000), an average annual decrease of 0.5 percent (see figure 1). Data from our 12 case study states show similar results. Over this same period, national data show a change in the type of victimization, as children who were victims of neglect versus physical abuse increased from 2.0 to 1 in 1993 to 2.2 to 1 in 1996 (DHHS 2000).

Post-Welfare Reform Trends

National data suggest that pre-welfare reform trends in child welfare caseloads continued following welfare reform. As shown in figure 1, the number of children investigated declined slightly between 1996 and 1998, from 2,988,000 in 1996 (43.3 per 1,000) to 2,973,000 in 1998 (42.5 per 1,000), an average annual decrease of 0.3 percent. Similarly, the number of children found to be victims of maltreatment decreased nationally from 1,012,000 in 1996 (14.7 per 1,000) to 903,000 in 1998 (12.9 per 1,000), an average annual decrease of 5.4 percent. During this period, the proportion of children who were victims of neglect versus physical abuse continued to increase from 2.2 to 1 in 1996 to 2.4 to 1 in 1998 (DHHS 2000).

As shown in table 1, data from our 12 case study states show that changes in the number of children investigated between 1996 and 1998 varied. Some case study states saw considerable increases in the number of children investigated for maltreatment. However, interviewees in these states did not believe welfare reform to be the reason. State officials in Texas and Michigan noted that changes in screening policies and

increased public awareness were the main reasons for the observed increase in the number of children investigated for abuse and neglect. All but one of the 11 states that provided victimization data for 1996 to 1998 saw a decline (see table 1). While several of these states had observed declines prior to welfare reform, in all of these states, the decline was greater after 1996.

Of course, welfare reform is not the only social policy change over the past three years that may have affected child welfare caseloads. Respondents noted that there were many other changes, some internal to the child welfare system and others external, that may have affected the number of families coming into the system. For example, many states have altered their screening, investigation, and assessment processes in ways that have directly affected the number of reports accepted for investigation and the number substantiated. Such changes include new centralized intake systems, alternative or multiple response systems that avoid court involvement and traditional investigation procedures in responding to child abuse or neglect reports, and use of structured decision-making tools. In addition, respondents identified several external factors likely to affect the number of allegations and substantiated reports of abuse and neglect including highly publicized child deaths, political and legislative initiatives, and changes in the economy.

Table 2: Average Annual Change in the Number of Children Investigated For And Found To Be Victims of Maltreatment (1993-1996 and 1996-1998)

	Children Investigated		Children With a Substantiated or Indicated Investigation	
	1993-96	1996-98	1993-96	1996-98
Alabama	-1.5%	-3.8%	-0.9%	-5.3
California	0.6	-5.4	4.2	-6.7
Colorado	-2.3*	-3.9*	-4.2	0.8
Florida	2.1	3.2	-3.0	5.0
Massachusetts	4.8	-1.4	4.2	0.6
Michigan	1.7	8.9	2.6	4.0
Minnesota	-5.0	-1.2	-4.7	1.8
New Jersey	1.4	6.0	0.1	-3.3
New York	-1.7	5.0	6.3	9.2
Texas	-4.9	7.1	-7.8	-5.3
Washington	-11.4	21.5**	-9.8**	-25.5**
Wisconsin	-2.5	-4.6***	-4.4%	-12.3***
U.S.	1.3	-0.3	-0.5%	-5.4

This includes both substantiated and indicated reports of maltreatment.
*Colorado reported the number of investigations, not the number of children investigated.
**During 1996-98, the number of reports Washington investigated decreased annually by 1.5 percent suggesting that the number of children identified in each investigation increased substantially or that the state altered its method of data collection. Washington's data reflect the number of victims of maltreatment, not the number of children with substantiated or indicated investigations. Further, in 1998, Washington no longer maintained an indicated category for victimization. If we compare only the percent substantiated between 1996 and 1998, the average annual change is 10.2 percent.
***Wisconsin's data are for 1996 to 1997 only. Wisconsin's 1998 data did not include Milwaukee and were thus not comparable to previous years.

Respondents' Assessment of Welfare Reform Effects

We asked case study respondents (i.e., child welfare and TANF administrators, child welfare supervisors and front-line staff, legislative representatives, and child and family advocates) to assess the effects of welfare changes on the number and types of families reported for abuse and neglect and to explain the basis for their opinion. Universally, respondents agreed that welfare reform had not significantly affected the

number of families coming to the attention of child welfare agencies. It should be noted that these opinions were largely based on personal knowledge and the absence of data or reports showing families that had not done well under welfare reform and had subsequently been referred for abuse or neglect. Respondents also said that they lacked data to conclude that welfare families were faring well following the reforms.

However, many respondents did identify a variety of smaller effects that welfare reform may have had on child abuse and neglect reporting. These respondents noted changes in the types of abuse and neglect alleged, the types of families referred, and the source of abuse and neglect reports.

Types of Abuse or Neglect

Many respondents argued that welfare reform has affected the reporting of families with specific types of presenting problems. Workers in five states noted that they have seen an increase in the number of families reported for inadequate supervision, and they believed that this was the direct result of welfare parents working and not being able to secure appropriate child care. However, only Michigan (where reports of inadequate supervision increased by 150 percent between 1996 and 1999) had caseload data that documented this increase. Workers noted that many mothers work odd hours or multiple shifts and are not receiving the child care assistance they need from welfare offices. Supervisors in Minnesota observed that there seems to be a new problem of "parentifying" the older children in a family to babysit when parents are working, though these older children may be only 10 years old and not capable of supervising a young child. Research from Illinois demonstrates that lack of supervision is the most common

reason that families sanctioned by welfare agencies are reported to child welfare authorities (Shook 1998).

Child welfare workers also reported that more families are coming to their attention due to general neglect issues resulting from poverty. For example, workers in New Jersey argued that welfare reform caused a redistribution of responsibility for responding to families in financial distress from the welfare office to the child welfare agency. These workers claimed that clients legitimately in need were being turned away from the welfare agency and that child welfare was providing emergency assistance to prevent the need for further protective supervision.[17] The workers described cases in which the agency paid past-due electric bills for families not in the system to avoid placing the children. Workers in several other states mentioned the increase in poverty-related referrals but did not believe there had been any shift in agency responsibilities because the child welfare agency was not responsible for, and was not assisting, families solely in financial distress.

There was almost unanimous agreement that child welfare agencies were receiving more reports related to domestic violence. While there is no evidence to determine whether or not the incidence of domestic violence has increased, the increased awareness of the problem and its effect on children has had a significant effect on abuse and neglect reporting. Welfare reform's attention to domestic violence (e.g., allowing work exemptions for victims of domestic violence) has added to the awareness of the

[17] It should be noted that even before welfare reform, child welfare agencies often provided emergency assistance to families to prevent placement, though the families came to child welfare attention because of abuse and neglect concerns. In contrast, it appears that more families may now be coming to child welfare in order to receive emergency assistance.

problem and appears to have contributed to an increase in domestic violence referrals to child welfare. Moreover, workers in Texas, California, Massachusetts, and Minnesota reported that as a result of policy changes, they now get every domestic violence case in which children are in the home. For example, as a result of new legislation in Minnesota, mothers who are victims of domestic violence are often charged with neglect for "failure to protect" the child.

In a few states, workers reported seeing families that had been sanctioned coming to the attention of child welfare after a period of time. Alameda County, California, conducted an informal study that matched a sample of child abuse and neglect reports with welfare data. They found that of 600 reports of abuse and neglect over a three-month period, about 100 had been sanctioned by the TANF office. A study in Michigan found that sanctioned families were 50 percent more likely to have had some contact with the child welfare system than nonsanctioned families (Colville et al. 1997).[18] Illinois data from a pre-welfare reform period show that child welfare involvement is greater among children associated with sanctioned family grants than among children whose grants are not sanctioned, and this effect is observed for every category of abuse or neglect (Shook 1998). Similarly, a California study using data on 1990 AFDC entrants showed that families with breaks in financial assistance were more likely to be involved with child welfare than families with ongoing welfare assistance (Needell et al. 1999). It would appear that if welfare reform increases the number of welfare families sanctioned, child welfare agencies could see some increase in families coming to their attention.

[18] However, sanctioned families were more likely to have been referred before sanction as well.

Workers in five states reported that immigrants were more likely to be reported for abuse and neglect than in the past, although it was not certain whether this was the result of welfare reform. Interestingly, this was expressed as being more of an issue in states with relatively small immigrant populations such as Colorado, Massachusetts and Minnesota, and less of an issue in New York and Texas, where many immigrants reside.

TANF Office Referrals

Although the vast majority of the total calls to abuse and neglect hotlines continue to come from education and medical personnel, reports from TANF offices have increased since welfare reform, child welfare noted. In many states the reason is obvious; TANF staff have been told to report all sanctioned families to child welfare agencies. In Florida, for example, when families are sanctioned for noncompliance for the second or third time, their information is sent to child welfare for a "desktop audit" to assess the potential for child neglect. The review looks at whether the family is known to child welfare, including whether they have an open case and whether they had ever been reported for abuse or neglect. Initially, families that had reached their time limits were also sent for review, but child welfare agencies had difficulty meeting the resulting increased workload demand.

Child welfare workers in several states also speculated that they received more referrals from TANF because TANF workers are having greater contact with families than under the old AFDC system. Child welfare workers noted the changing role of the TANF eligibility workers and their efforts to more fully understand barriers to self-sufficiency, including identifying problematic domestic violence, mental health, and

family dynamics issues. In contrast, a few workers felt that referrals from TANF workers had decreased and believed that families were afraid they would have their children removed and thus were much less open about their financial distress.

In many states, TANF workers are having more contact with recipients because they are conducting home visits. Child welfare workers in Michigan and Florida noted a significant increase in abuse and neglect reports that resulted from such visits. Michigan child welfare workers said that many of these calls were not appropriate and theorized that TANF staff were not used to seeing such poverty and equated such conditions with neglect. As noted earlier, child welfare officials are clear that poverty does not equate to neglect, but in many states TANF workers reported families because of poverty or poverty-related problems. In particular, child welfare workers in several states described how TANF staff reported any family that was homeless to child welfare.

Workers in several states also noted that TANF office referrals increased after welfare workers received training on abuse and neglect reporting. Child welfare workers in California and Florida noted that welfare staff initially were "reporting everything," but that the reporting diminished after they received feedback from child welfare about appropriate reporting. Officials in several states also noted that collocation of welfare and child welfare staff tended to increase the number of reports made, and collocation had increased as a result of welfare reform.[19]

[19] For more information see Ehrle et al. In press.

Why Are We Not Seeing Greater Effects?

Respondents offered numerous explanations for why they were not seeing the significant negative effects of welfare reform on child abuse and neglect reporting that they had originally anticipated. These explanations relate to how states are implementing welfare reform, how families who have difficulty are coping, and external factors that are assisting these families.

The most common response to our questions about the effects of welfare reform on the child welfare system was "It's too early to tell." Respondents argued that in many ways, welfare families have not yet felt the brunt of the reforms. In most of the states we visited, the two-year limits to a work requirement had not yet hit, and in no state had the five-year lifetime limit on case assistance taken effect. Moreover, many vulnerable families were exempt from work requirements. In most states, welfare recipients who were receiving mental health services, substance abuse treatment, or domestic violence counseling were exempt. While many states have seen their welfare caseloads drop significantly since reforms were passed, officials in many of our case study states were quick to point out that the families exiting the welfare rolls were the most job-ready and least vulnerable families and were probably least likely to need protective supervision. Moreover, in some states, relatively few welfare recipients have been sanctioned for noncompliance with welfare requirements. Several respondents also noted that many families have been helped by welfare reform (both economically as well as through increased motivation and self-esteem), making them less likely to need assistance from the child welfare system.

Many respondents suggested that families that have lost benefits following welfare reform changes have thus far found other supports that allow them to cope with the financial loss. Many families are relying on relatives and friends and other informal resources for short-term support. Child welfare workers in New York, New Jersey, and Minnesota reported seeing much more doubling-up in housing. In addition to informal resources, families are seeking out public assistance beyond welfare. In particular, workers reported that many parents have started to apply for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for themselves and/or their children. In many states, welfare offices are making a concerted effort to ensure that all eligible families receive SSI assistance.

A large majority of respondents (administrators as well as front-line workers) believe that welfare reform is still likely to have a significant negative impact on child welfare caseloads. Some respondents were extremely pessimistic, with one commenting that "the sky is yet to fall, but it will." Other respondents expressed concern but noted that the impact of welfare reform will depend upon what safety net remains for families that lose benefits.

Respondents were concerned about what would happen when welfare reform really "kicked in." The most commonly expressed fear was that when time limits were reached, some of the most vulnerable families would be terminated from the welfare rolls and would wind up on the child welfare doorstep. Respondents noted that many welfare recipients are completely unprepared to deal with life without public assistance. Some respondents noted that some recipients are in denial as they do not believe the lifetime limits are real and are not taking action. In California, where welfare reform was implemented relatively late, several child welfare workers commented that "everyone's

heard so much for so many years and nothing ever really pans out." Some respondents themselves believe that welfare is likely to be reformed again (either at the federal or state level) before many families reach their five-year time limits. Respondents also expressed fear that more families will be sanctioned in the future as states become tougher on recipients.

Respondents questioned how long marginal families could cope with the loss of public assistance. They noted that informal supports would eventually dry up and that many families would be unable to secure other public assistance. Respondents also questioned how long the economy could continue to thrive and what would happen when the job market tightened, especially the market for low-skill jobs.

Other respondents suggested that we are not seeing significant effects because we are not looking. Few TANF or child welfare administrators we spoke to knew of any research being conducted in their locality to examine the effects of welfare reform on child welfare caseloads. As discussed in more detail below, we have very limited hard data on the extent to which welfare families are being reported to child welfare agencies for abuse or neglect.

Effects of Welfare Reform on Dual-System Families

If welfare reform has affected child welfare caseloads thus far, it appears that it has had a greater effect on dual-system families (families involved with both welfare and child welfare agencies) than on new families coming to the attention of child welfare authorities. This conclusion is based on the views of case study respondents who documented the struggles that some child welfare families have experienced in attempting to meet the demands placed on them by both child welfare and welfare agencies. Most dual-system families are those under ongoing protective supervision but still intact, since once a family has all of its children in foster care, it is no longer eligible for TANF benefits.[20] If dual-system families were having significant problems meeting requirements imposed by welfare reform, one might expect to see an increase in the number of dual-system families that are unable to remain together. However, caseload data show no increase in the number of children coming into foster care. Moreover, changes in the outcomes of dual-system families are particularly hard to interpret because significant reforms are being implemented in child welfare agencies.

Pre- and Post-Welfare Reform Trends

Caseload data show no significant changes in the foster care population since welfare reform. However, foster care data are not available specifically for welfare families, making it difficult to determine whether the number of children from welfare families in foster care has changed. The foster care population is in constant motion and

is a function of the number of children entering foster care, children's length of stay in foster care, and the number of children exiting care. Nationally, the foster care population grew throughout the 1990s. As illustrated in figure 2, the number of children entering and exiting foster care has fluctuated at approximately the same rate during the 1990s. However, as the number of children entering foster care has consistently outnumbered the number of children exiting care, the foster care population has continued to increase.

Pre-Welfare Reform Trends

Between 1982 and 1993, the number of children in foster care increased by 70 percent, from 262,000 to 445,000 and the number of children in foster care has continued to increase each year (U.S. Congress 1998). As shown in figure 2, the number of children in foster care increased from an estimated 445,000 children in 1993 (6.64 per 1,000) to an estimated 507,000 in 1996 (7.35 per 1,000), an average annual increase of 4.7 percent. During the same period, the number of children entering care increased by an average of 1.8 percent per year (3.36 to 3.43 per 1,000) and the number of children exiting averaged an annual increase of 1.1 percent (3.16 per 1,000 in both years). Our case study states reported similar pre-welfare reform trends.

Post-Welfare Reform Trends

Between 1996 and 1999, the number of children in foster care continued to rise, from 507,000 (7.35 per 1,000) to 550,000 (7.59 per 1,000), an average annual increase of

[20] Benefits continue for 45 days after children have been removed or, at the option of the state, for up to

2.3 percent (see figure 2). During that period the number of children entering care and exiting care both declined, with entrances continuing to exceed the exits. Our case study states reported similar trends.

Respondents identified a number of factors other than welfare reform that may have affected the number of children placed in foster care and/or the length of time children already in foster care remain in placement. Enactment of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 has been viewed by many child welfare stakeholders as the single most influential initiative to redirect and reform the delivery of child welfare services across the country. The Act encourages more timely permanency and is designed to reduce foster children's length of stay in the system. While ASFA may reduce lengths of stay, child welfare agencies are increasingly relying on relatives or kin to act as foster parents for children requiring out-of-home placement and research has consistently shown that children in kinship care tend to remain in care longer than children placed with non-kin (Benedict and White 1991; Berrick, Needell, and Barth 1995; Chipungu, Everett, and Verduik 1998; Courtney 1994; Testa 1997). In addition, some respondents noted that child welfare agencies were increasingly serving families with such severe barriers to effective parenting that keeping families intact was becoming harder. Other respondents noted that increased prevention and family preservation resources may be reducing the number of children who would otherwise be placed in foster care. In addition, the same external factors discussed above that affect the number of children reported for abuse and neglect may also affect the number placed in foster care.

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120 days.

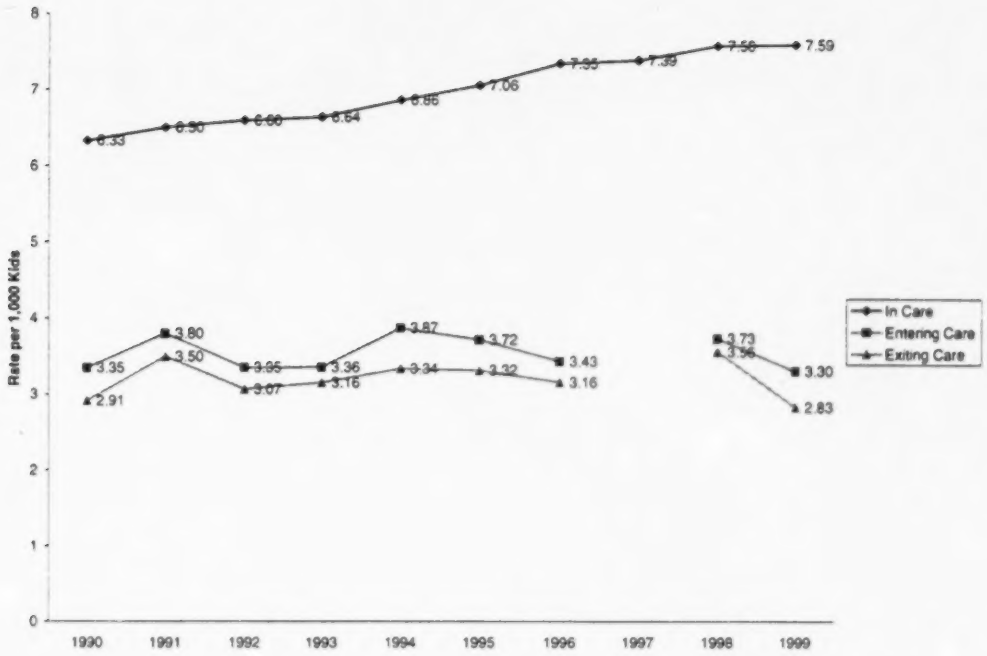

Figure 2: Pre- and Post-Welfare Reform Foster Care Caseloads, Entrants, and Exits (Source: VCIS data provide by the American Public Human Services Association, and state AFCARS data provided to DHHS)

Respondents' Assessment of Welfare Reform's Effects

Respondents noted that some dual-system families are having difficulty managing the requirements of both programs. However, respondents also noted that some welfare recipients have benefited from welfare reform as they have increased their self-esteem and motivation for becoming self-sufficient. While respondents offered numerous examples of cases where the TANF and child welfare systems' plans and requirements for dual-system families undermine one another, it is worth noting that the further removed interview respondents were from direct contact with families, the less likely they were to report that welfare reform has affected families in the child welfare system. Thus, most

of the identified effects are based on the testimony of front-line workers and supervisors. Workers noted four ways in which dual-system families may be affected by inadequate coordination between welfare and child welfare agencies:

- Work requirements may conflict with families' access to child welfare imposed services and attendance at court hearings;
- Families may be overwhelmed by the stress of attempting to meet the requirements of both systems;
- Families with emergency needs not addressed by TANF may have children placed in foster care; and
- Mandating work without adequate child care may undermine child safety and lead to neglect reports.

Work Requirements Conflict with Mandatory Services and Court Hearings

There were reports from many local offices that the work requirements of TANF conflict with the services and court hearings imposed on a family by the child welfare system. Workers in many states report trying to advocate for their clients by working with TANF staff, but they are overwhelmed and cannot always ensure that conflicts do not arise. For example, in Chelsea, Massachusetts, workers told of clients whose daytime court dates conflict with their daytime work schedule. These workers noted that failure to appear before the court in order to avoid absenteeism at work resulted in a negative reaction from the judge, who voiced skepticism about the mother's sincerity in trying to help her child if she could not even show up for court. Similarly, Erie County, New York, child welfare workers noted how their clients' daytime working schedules made them unavailable for case reviews, required service appointments, court hearings, and visits with children in foster care. Child welfare supervisors in Hudson County, New Jersey, reported isolated successes in arranging a few nighttime services, but also noted that even when services could be offered at night there was no child care or transportation to make

utilization feasible. Minneapolis workers spoke about how much trickier it has become to find services for child welfare clients after work hours, especially critical services such as substance abuse assessments.

Meeting Requirements of Both Systems Increases Stress

Child welfare workers in six states reported that they are seeing more abandoned children and felt this was the result of parents simply being overwhelmed by the stress of poverty coupled with welfare requirements. One group of workers noted that families attempt to drop their children off at the child welfare office and say, "Take them, please. I can't do all this!" Similarly, in attempting to reunify families, workers spoke of families that do not want their children back.

Workers in several states also commented on the pressure on families caused by the new timelines placed on self-sufficiency as a result of welfare reform, and the timelines for permanency created by ASFA. Workers noted that parents sometimes feel as if they must choose between TANF and keeping their children because they cannot possibly meet all the requirements of both systems at the same time.

Lack of Coordination to Meet Emergency Needs Jeopardizes Families

As we noted earlier, workers reported that many clients sought out child welfare services to obtain emergency assistance that TANF agencies denied them. Workers reported that lack of emergency assistance from TANF also affected dual-system families. For example, a common theme across many of the offices we visited was that the robust economy had resulted in increased housing costs. As a consequence, inadequate housing among poor families in the child welfare and TANF caseloads had

increased. In some jurisdictions, workers complained that when they tried to coordinate with their counterparts in TANF to stave off or solve housing problems, the TANF workers would not accept any responsibility for solving the problem. For example, child welfare workers in Seattle noted that TANF workers do not always inform clients of the availability of supplemental payments for rent under TANF. One worker observed that when TANF sanctions a family, often child welfare steps in to prevent eviction. While this averts removal of the children from the home, it also weakens the sanction. Workers in many localities explained that the high cost of housing was a frequent barrier to reunifying as well as preserving families. In addition, in some locales, families with chronic housing problems may have their children removed and placed in foster care.

Mandating Work without Adequate Child Care May Undermine Child Safety

Finally, child welfare workers and supervisors in many states commented on the strain that work requirements place on child safety when child care provisions are inadequate, and on the effect this has on child welfare agency involvement with families. It is difficult to know how much inadequate child care results from parents not getting child care subsidies from TANF workers versus parents making poor child care choices.

Many Families Enjoy Greater Self-Esteem and Motivation

Workers commented that the goals of child welfare and welfare are consistent with each other, as both systems strive to give parents the skills to take care of themselves and their children without public assistance or intervention. Workers in most of the states we visited identified examples of dual-system families that benefited from

welfare reform's focus on work and self-sufficiency. Dual-system families with good welfare reform experiences displayed greater self-esteem and motivation for completing child welfare case plans. In addition, some dual-system families enjoyed greater financial stability, which reduced the need for foster care placement or made reunification easier.

Why Are We Not Seeing Greater Effects?

Respondents offered several explanations for why effects of welfare reform on dual-system families are not yet more widespread; explanations that mirror those offered regarding changes in new cases of child abuse and neglect. The most common of these was, "It's too early to tell; you've come too soon; you need to return about a year from now." In most states the two-year maximum limit before a work requirement takes effect had not yet occurred, much less the five-year lifetime limit on cash assistance. Other reasons given include the following:

- Many if not most dual-system families have been exempted from work requirements, or meeting child welfare case plans is counted as a work activity;
- To date, the easiest to serve are those most likely to have faced work requirements and entered employment, so states are just beginning to work with multiple-barrier families;
- In many states, sanction rates for noncompliance have been somewhat low or have involved only a modest reduction in, but not termination of, the welfare payment;
- Child welfare has stepped in, though they "shouldn't have had to," to fill in deficits left by TANF, especially to help with rent, emergency food, and child care; and
- Few studies are analyzing the effects of welfare reform on dual-system families, so there may be effects that have not been captured.

Finally, numerous factors external to both the child welfare and welfare systems other than welfare reform may affect child welfare caseloads, most notably economic and demographic changes.

Conclusion

Based on our study, there appears to be no evidence to suggest that federal welfare reform has to date had a significant effect on child welfare caseloads. In comparing pre- and post-welfare reform caseload data (national and state specific) we found no large changes. Moreover, the testimony of more than 350 state and local respondents support this conclusion. In hindsight, it appears that the fear that welfare reform alone would significantly increase the number of families requiring child welfare intervention was unrealistic, at least in the short term. However, our research has identified potential areas of concern for policymakers as welfare reform proceeds—concerns about specific populations that may be vulnerable, unmet training needs of both TANF and child welfare agency staff, the potential effects of additional sanctions and time limits, and the scope of the research under way and planned to assess the effects of welfare reform.

Given that we have not found evidence of a significant effect of welfare reform on child welfare caseloads, it is time to revisit our assumptions about why we believed there would be an effect and why many still believe that there will be an effect in the near future. We hypothesized that welfare reform would reduce the income of families that could not meet new requirements. Thus far, some states report that relatively few families have experienced significant income declines as a result of welfare reform. This is, in part, due to relatively liberal earned income disregards in some states and the fact that time limits have yet to affect many families. And there is no doubt that the robust economy has contributed to the success of many welfare families. As a result, many

policymakers and program administrators are still predicting a significant negative effect of welfare reform on child welfare when families lose income as the result of lifetime benefit limits and a weaker economy.

But our assumptions about the links between welfare and child welfare involvement may also be flawed. While poverty is highly correlated with child welfare involvement, income alone is not a very good predictor of abuse and neglect nor grounds for a finding of abuse or neglect. Moreover, a relatively small segment of the welfare population relies entirely on public cash assistance for basic necessities. It certainly appears that many families can survive if not thrive without assistance and are able to find other sources of support if needed. Finally, it is possible that the most vulnerable welfare families are already involved with child welfare agencies. Thus, if they are affected by welfare reform, we might possibly see a change in the number of such families able to remain intact, but not in the number coming to the attention of child welfare.

We also assumed that welfare reform would increase the amount of contact that TANF workers had with families, which would lead to greater reporting of abuse and neglect. Our research appears to support this assumption given that child welfare staff in most states reported increased referrals from TANF. However, it is unclear how appropriate TANF office referrals have been. In addition, we assumed that TANF offices would have greater contact with welfare recipients, but with the number of families leaving the welfare rolls and the number diverted, TANF offices may in fact have contact with fewer families.

State reports of increased referrals for inadequate supervision tend to support the hypothesis that welfare parents who are forced to work may be unable to find adequate child care. However, it is unclear why many welfare recipients are having difficulty securing child care, especially given the large increase in federal and state investment for child care subsidies. Welfare recipients may not know of or understand their eligibility for subsidies. Alternatively, recipients may have difficulty finding child care arrangements that meet their needs.

It appears that concern for dual-system families may be well founded given the testimony of child welfare workers and supervisors. Many states have begun to recognize the potential for conflicts between welfare and child welfare demands on families and are designing strategies to improve interagency information sharing and coordination. The influx of new resources into TANF agencies to meet substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental health issues of welfare recipients could allow child welfare agencies to access services for dual-system clients that they previously had difficulty securing. Moreover, our study has identified instances in which families that have positive TANF experiences can improve their self-esteem and gain the motivation necessary for achieving the goals of their child welfare case plans.

Evaluating the effects of any policy change is fraught with challenges, and researchers are rarely if ever able to draw definitive conclusions. This is certainly the case for evaluations of welfare reform. However, this does not mean that well-designed studies cannot provide policymakers with useful information about how policy changes are implemented and how changes may be affecting different types of people. Unfortunately, to date most of the studies assessing welfare reform effects provide little if

any useful information to child welfare policymakers. Future studies need to link changes in individual welfare families' income, employment, child care arrangements, interaction with TANF workers, and receipt of supportive services directly to child welfare involvement and child welfare outcomes.

Appendix A

Findings from Other Welfare Reform Studies

Despite numerous studies examining the effects of welfare reform, we have very limited data on the effects of changes on child welfare caseloads. To date, the majority of welfare reform studies conducted or under way have focused on the outcomes of families leaving welfare. The studies that have examined the effects of welfare reform on child welfare caseloads have found relatively low incidence of child welfare involvement among the leaver population. In addition to the leaver studies, a few other studies have the potential to provide significant insight into the effects of welfare reform on child welfare caseloads, but most of these studies are in their early stages.

Leaver studies have generally relied on two types of data: state or local administrative records and direct surveys of families that have left welfare. Each of these sources can provide valuable but limited information about different aspects of the well-being of welfare leavers. Administrative data are generally very accurate for information required to determine program eligibility or benefit amounts but are much less reliable for information on family and household composition and other demographic characteristics. Moreover, welfare administrative data do not contain information on families that no longer receive benefits, thus requiring researchers to link these records to other administrative data to determine how leavers are faring. Information about child abuse and neglect is most easily and accurately obtained through administrative data. However, administrative data will not identify incidents of abuse and neglect that are not reported to public agencies.

Surveys of welfare leavers can obtain information not available through administrative data systems. For example, surveys can document hardships that leavers have experienced that have not come to the attention of public agencies or that have not been added to agency records. Surveys can also assess levels of child and family well-being and identify the presence or absence of factors in the home that increase the risk of child abuse and neglect or other negative outcomes. Surveys can also elicit information on changes in a leaver's personal characteristics and household composition. However, surveys rely on a respondent who may not always be able or willing to provide accurate information. Collecting information about sensitive issues such as child abuse and neglect through surveys is particularly problematic.

Leaver Studies Using Administrative Data

In 1999 Urban Institute researchers reviewed the designs of 44 of the early leaver studies being conducted in 29 states.[21] Only 18 of the 44 studies used administrative data, and only three (Arizona, Maryland, and Washington) appeared to use welfare data linked to child welfare data. Table 2 shows findings from studies in 11 states. Maryland researchers, for example, looked at a cohort of 3,467 children exiting TANF between October 1996 and August 1997 (using matched administrative files from the two programs) and found that 2.7 percent were in foster care at some time prior to exit, while 0.4 percent had at least one episode after exit (Maryland DHR 1998). Researchers in Washington found that welfare leavers are less likely to have children with child abuse and neglect referrals and are less likely to have children who are placed in foster care

(both before and after leaving welfare) than those who remain on welfare (Ahn and Fogarty 1999). The Washington researchers noted that a "plausible, yet unproven explanation is that the adults remaining on the caseload are 'harder to serve' and are more likely to have higher incidence of substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental health issues, all risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect" (Ahn and Fogarty 1999, p. 47). In Arizona, researchers compared the child welfare histories of families exiting TANF and found no increase in the number of substantiated child protective services reports or foster care placements following exit from cash assistance (Westra and Routley 2000).

In 1999, the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) examined 18 studies in 17 states that contained information on the status of former welfare recipients. Only two (Maryland and South Carolina) used administrative data to report on the number of children in former recipient families that had been involved with child protective services (GAO 1999). South Carolina compared the number of incidents of maltreatment reported to the Child Protective Services' Central Registry for a sample of families who had left welfare with the number of incidents for families still on welfare. It also compared the number of incidents of maltreatment in a sample of former welfare families before and after leaving welfare. The differences were not statistically significant for either comparison.

In 1998, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), funded 14 leaver studies. Of these studies, eight reported that they planned to use child welfare administrative data.

[21] Acs and Loprest 2000.

Based on the evaluation reports submitted to ASPE (many of which are still preliminary), it appears that at least four studies linked child welfare and welfare data (Arizona, Illinois, Missouri, and Washington). Illinois researchers reported that leavers experienced the greatest level of child welfare involvement (both substantiated reports of abuse and neglect and foster care placement) in the quarter before and the quarter of exit (Julnes et al. 2000). The authors noted that one possible explanation for this finding is that children on active TANF cases may receive greater attention and their parents greater scrutiny than they do after they exit. Alternatively, the authors note that substantiated abuse or neglect or foster care placement may cause the family to exit from TANF. Missouri reported that a very small percentage of families have child welfare involvement (including receiving voluntary or family preservation services or being the subject of a substantiated abuse or neglect report) after TANF departure (Ryan and Koon 2000).

Leaver Studies Relying on Survey Data

In addition to examining administrative data, several states (Kansas, Kentucky, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Washington, and Wisconsin) have relied on surveys to collect information about changes in living arrangements, including foster care placements. None of these states report significant effects of welfare reform on children's living arrangements. A review by Child Trends, Inc. of "Child Outcomes in Leaver Studies: Exact Items from the Surveys Covering Child Outcomes" found few outcomes being analyzed that relate to child abuse and neglect or foster care. The child outcomes studied relate to social behavior and emotional states of children, delinquency,

Table 2: Findings from Leaver Studies on Child Welfare Involvement

State	Administrative Data	Survey Data	Findings
Arizona	✓		No increase in the number of substantiated child protective services reports or foster care placements following exit from cash assistance.
Illinois	✓		Leavers experienced the greatest level of child welfare involvement (both substantiated reports of abuse and neglect and foster care placement) in the quarter before and the quarter of exit.
Kansas		✓	Fewer than 2% of 291 families exiting TANF reported to have a child placed in foster care three months following case closure (Tweedie, Reichert, and O'Conner 1999).
Kentucky		✓	About one-third of the leaver sample (33.8%) reported they had children living outside the household, though only .5% were in foster care (Cummings and Nelson 1998).
Maryland	✓		Based on a cohort of 3,467 children exiting TANF between October 1996 and August 1997, 2.7% were in foster care at some time prior to exit while 0.4% had at least one episode after exit (DHR 1998).
Missouri	✓		A very small percentage of families have child welfare involvement (including receiving voluntary or family preservation services or being the subject of a substantiated abuse or neglect report) after TANF departure.
North Carolina		✓	No change in families' involvement with child welfare in the immediate months after leaving the TANF caseload (Richardson et al. 1999).
Oklahoma		✓	Few cases involved with child welfare following case closure (GAO 1999).
South Carolina	✓	✓	Found no difference in the number of incidents of maltreatment reported to the Child Protective Services' Central Registry for a sample of families who had left welfare and the number of incidents for families still on welfare. Survey found no difference in the percentage of children living elsewhere during and after families' receipt of TANF (GAO 1999).
Washington	✓	✓	Welfare leavers are less likely to have children with child abuse and neglect referrals and are less likely to have children who are placed in foster care (both before and after leaving welfare) than those who remain on welfare. Survey found that few families were involved with child welfare following case closure.
Wisconsin		✓	Four percent of leavers reported that a child lived elsewhere while the family received cash assistance; 5% lived apart after leaving welfare (DWD 1997).

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general health, limiting conditions, school attendance and performance, and suspensions and expulsions.

Non-Leaver Studies

In addition to the leaver studies, several research efforts are seeking to examine the effects of welfare reform on children and families. A few studies soon to be completed or currently under way are focused on child welfare outcomes. First, the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago has for several years been pioneering methods to link administrative data sets that include children in the child welfare and AFDC/TANF systems. Resulting studies include "Monitoring Child and Family Social Program Outcomes: Before and After Welfare Reform in Four States." Using a quasi-experimental design and longitudinal administrative data tracking individual children and families, including dual-system families, researchers will analyze whether welfare reform results in (1) an increase in the prevalence of relatives caring for children and in the number of different living arrangements for children; (2) alterations to the rates of reporting and substantiating child abuse and neglect; and (3) changes in the rate of out-of-home placement overall.

Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation's (MDRC's) Project on Devolution and Urban Change will study four welfare reform efforts: CalWorks in Los Angeles; WAGES in Dade County, Florida; Ohio Works First in Cuyahoga County; and RESET in Philadelphia. Research will include child outcomes such as family formation and stability/living arrangements, foster care, and child abuse and neglect. Administrative data from TANF and child welfare will be examined.

Case Western Reserve University, in collaboration with the Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services, has launched a five-year study of the effect of welfare reform on the child welfare system. The study is using government data on child welfare, public assistance, and employment along with in-depth interviews of program participants. The first phase of the research is analyzing changes in the child welfare caseloads before and after welfare reform based on three groups of children in out-of-home placement: children who entered placement over a six-month period before welfare reform; children placed during the first six months after Ohio's welfare reform began in October 1, 1997; and children placed during the six-month period that began October 1, 2000, when the first Ohio recipients exhausted their three-year eligibility and can potentially lose their benefits. The study is comparing conditions before and after welfare reform, focusing on issues including the number of children in placements such as foster care, group homes, and residential treatment centers; the severity of the maltreatment that prompted placement; the length of time in placement; and the number of children who are eventually reunited with their families. The second phase of the study will feature in-depth interviews with 200 randomly selected families with children in the child welfare system to determine how the use of welfare, loss of income, and employment interact with the neighborhood poverty level to affect out-of-home placement.

Early findings from Cuyahoga County suggest that welfare reform may have had an effect on child welfare involvement. The study found that there was a consistent pattern of increases in the number of neglect reports, "dirty/unsafe environment" reports, and substantiated reports referred to protective services and to foster care. There was

also an upward trend in the proportion of children referred to foster care between 1995 and 1998. The authors of the study found that "in general, increases in [child abuse and neglect] reports and other negative child welfare outcomes were related to decreases in Cuyahoga County AFDC caseloads for that same month, controlling for the unemployment rate in the county." The authors are quick to point out that "these findings are correlational rather than causal in nature" (Wells et al. 2000, p. iv).

In addition to the studies discussed above that are focused on child welfare outcomes, several studies are focused more generally on the effects of welfare reform on child and family well-being. For example, a study under way by evaluators at eight universities, called "Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study," will assess family formation and stability/living arrangements, including foster care, as outcomes of welfare reform in Boston, San Antonio, and Chicago. Methods include household surveys and qualitative analysis and observation of parent-child interactions. Likewise, in the study "National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies" being conducted by the MDRC in one county each in California, Georgia, and Michigan, researchers are studying child abuse and neglect outcomes from welfare-to-work programs that pre-date PRWORA. The study is relying on a home survey.

In the "Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study," 15 researchers from Columbia and Princeton universities and elsewhere are assessing outcomes of welfare reform on child neglect among 30- to 48-month-old children in 22 sites. The information will come from an in-home child neglect module in the Fragile Families household survey and in-home assessments. Thus, this study is focused more on assessing the incidence of neglect rather than the effects of welfare reform on child welfare caseloads.

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